

The Signs of Alcoholism

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism defines alcoholism (or alcohol dependence) as a chronic disease with four symptoms:

1. Craving - A strong need, or urge, to drink alcohol
2. Loss of control - The inability to limit one's drinking on any given occasion.
3. Physical dependence - Withdrawal symptoms, such as nausea, sweating, shakiness, and anxiety, occur when alcohol use is stopped after a period of heavy drinking.
4. Tolerance - The need to drink greater amounts of alcohol in order to "get high."

A craving for alcohol can be a lifetime struggle for some individuals. For those individuals the urge to drink can be as strong as the need for food or water. The development of the disease of alcoholism is dependent on a number of factors. These factors may include having a family history of alcoholism, peer pressure, an individual's culture, and how they live their daily lives.

Prevalence of Alcohol Use and Abuse

According to the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse: Volume I from 2001 (conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Office of Applied Studies), more than 48% of Americans aged 12 or older reported being current drinkers of alcohol. According to the most recent data available, nearly 43% of Kentucky residents aged 12 or older reported using alcohol in the last month with nearly 7% reporting alcohol abuse or dependence (2004-2005 National Surveys on Drug Use and Health conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Office of Applied Studies).

Impact on the Workplace

A common myth is that there are no problem drinkers in the workplace, but quite the opposite is true. Many individuals that are heavy drinkers are gainfully employed, though supervisors and co-workers may not be aware of the signs. Co-workers, and often managers, may even pick up the slack or cover for the impaired employee. Signs that a coworker or employee may have a drinking problem may include:

- Tardiness and absenteeism, particularly on or after paydays and a Friday/Monday pattern.
- Decline in performance and productivity.
- Employee may come to work with alcohol on their breath.
- Increased workers' compensation claims, which result from accidents occurring while the employee is under the influence.

Impact on Self and Family

Alcohol abuse or dependence has a significant effect on both the individual and his or her family. They may have legal problems that result from committing crimes while under the influence (DUI, public intoxication, assault). Health problems such as liver disease, heart disease, gastrointestinal and cardiovascular problems, sexual dysfunction, and diabetes complications can all result from excessive drinking. Heavy drinkers and alcoholics may also experience withdrawal symptoms that include nausea, headaches, anxiety, sweating, and shaking after a period of drinking. Other issues such as impaired judgment, changes in personality, or blackouts can also negatively impact the individual's health and social and family lives.

The impact of alcohol abuse on the family is often experienced as anger, guilt, shame and resentment. These stressful emotions are experienced not only by the family members, but by the individual abusing alcohol as well. Their home life becomes negatively impacted when the attention is given to drinking instead of to family members and family obligations. Relationships become strained when the person is emotionally or physically unavailable. Children may be embarrassed to bring their friends home if a parent is under the influence.

Financial Impact

According to the George Washington Medical Center the following costs are associated with an untreated alcohol abuser or addict:

- Each untreated employee averages 9.4 lost work days each year due to sickness, injury and absence related to drinking.
- Each untreated employee averages \$5,315 each year in extra health care costs to the employer and the employee for health problems resulting from the alcohol abuse.

However, research does reflect that treatment is cost-effective. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the average cost of outpatient treatment is \$1,433.

Getting Help

Many times the individual with the alcohol or drug problem is the last to acknowledge that they need help. However, admitting the need for help and finding treatment can be done through the support of family, friends or co-workers. Kentucky State Government has a program in place for employees that can assist with obtaining help. The Kentucky Employee Assistance Program (KEAP) is there to coach the family, friends and co-workers on how to approach the employee in a manner that is most likely to result in a commitment to get treatment. Once the individual has made that commitment, there are a number of available options including assessment and referral to counseling and treatment.

Sources:

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

George Washington Medical Center

Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT), developed by the World Health Organization